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Prologue:

"Mama, mama!" the shrill voices of kits young for many moons came.
The eye lids of a black she-cat flew open at the mews, her green eyes flashing with recognition. Attention on the kits, she forgot about the sleeping warriors who lay around her and moved to her paws, asking, "Nightkit, Mistkit, what are you doing here? Is StarClan calling for me so soon?"
"No," the she-kit who looked like her mother meowed and her sister added, "come meet the new kit!" The kits, starshine illuminating their pelts, turned tail and dashed out of the warriors' den. Their mother followed them with quick steps, only hesitating when she passed their littermate, a large tabby tom who had grown into a strong warrior.
The sisters led their mother across the clearing and toward the nursery, where cries from a queen were escaping the carefully crafted den walls. Several days prior a kit had been born, and it seemed more were coming this very night; it was a very good thing as without kits the clan would soon run out of apprentices and eventually have fewer warriors.
The sisters excitedly shrieked some more. "C'mon!" "Come see!"
The one-time queen ducked her head as she gently entered the nursery, not quite aware her presence would go unnoticed as she had merely stepped out of her body for this dream. Her soft steps follower her daughters' nonexistent trails until she was looking down a pale ginger tabby queen being assisted by the silver medicine cat and his spotted apprentice.
"Goldenflower's first litter," the dark queen murmured, her deceased kits bouncing as the young queen's first child entered the world.
"Fire, fire!" the little ones were singing as they excitedly hopped up and down.
'If I didn't know any better,' their mother thought, 'I'd think their paws were on fire.' But the thought did not last long because she instead asked, "What're you talking about darlings?" There was no fire around, not even a hint of burning-scent in the air.
The daughters looked to their mother, their eyes large and round

like moons, their tails standing up straight and they were stretching their limbs to be as tall as could be. "Fire alone will save the clan!" they exclaimed in unison.
Confused, the queen's ears fell back a moment and she looked, puzzled, at her daughters. She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could another cat from the afterlife appeared.
"Forget what they're telling you, Leopardfoot," the speckled grey tom half-growled, "they misunderstood what they shouldn't have even heard." He gave the kits a stern look.
"Goosefeather," the black she-cat, Leopardfoot, asked, "what is going on?"
He huffed as his pale blue gaze moved from her kits to hers. "This kitten," his tail lashed toward the fuzzy bundle now nestled into Goldenflower's belly, "is going to do nothing but destroy the clans."
Leopardfoot was shocked a moment, but then her ears fell flat, "You're just as insane in death as you grew to be in life!"
His ears fell flat as well and his eyes narrowed, "For a moment I had forgotten that these sorts of kits appeal to your sympathy." With that, he padded around her kits, and all three of the StarClan cats were gone and Leopardfoot found herself in the darkness of sleep before waking to morning's first light.
Ignoring her body's feeling of grogginess, she rushed out of the warriors' den, pushing by her clanmates, and rushed toward the nursery. Before she was too near she heard voices.
"She's obviously her father's daughter," the leader commented.
Her deputy's voice floated out on the milk-scented air from beside his higher-up, "Have you already decided on a name?"
Leopardfoot was entering the den as Goldenflower's tired, but proud, response came, "Yes. Her name is Firekit."
"Perfect," the deputy purred, "she's beautiful."
"Oh," the grey-blue leader meowed as Leopardfoot approached alongside her, "come to see our newest clanmate, Leopardfoot?"
Leopardfoot nodded and met Bluestar's blue gaze as she responded, "Yes, I heard Goldenflower even in my dreams and woke with an intense interest."
Bluestar flicked an ear toward the queen and kit as Leopardfoot was finally close enough to see with no obstructions.
The bundle of fur was dark brown with ginger patches and a bushy ginger tail. A cloud in the sky moved and sent shaft of light into the den from a gap in the ceiling and the ginger fur appeared as

brilliant as a blaze in the forest.
Leopardfoot's tail swished and she looked at the kit in wonder, recalling what the cats of StarClan had said to her. Redtail purred and gave the kit a lick, Goldenflower admired her firstborn, and Bluestar's voice warmly mewed, "Firekit—she'll grow to be a fine warrior and serve her clan well."

Chapter 1:

"Lightningkit, look what I caught!" A fluffy brown and ginger tabby she-kit called out excitedly.
A pale but dark-striped tom trotted over to her, "You did not!"
"I did too," she protested and flexed her little claws.
He laughed, "Only if you used Redtail to catch it; I saw him drop it for you."
The she-kit purred, dropping her game, "Yeah, isn't he great?"
Lightningkit rolled his eyes but then prodded the dead mouse beside his friend, "What do you think it tastes like?"
The she-kit sniffed the recently deceased body before taking a bite.
Before waiting for his friend to finish her bite and report to him, Lightningkit took a bite of his own.
The she-kit's ears fell against her head as she swallowed and then meowed, "You took such a big bite; this is my mouse, not yours!"
From behind them, their mothers broke from conversation and one called out, "Warriors share, Firekit."
The kit glared at her friend while their mothers picked up their conversation from where they were sharing tongues right outside of the nursery.
"I've noticed Patchpelt glancing over here more than before," Robinwing mewed, "and it's certainly not because of Lightningkit; he's made it clear he has little interest in kits."
Goldenflower paused in her grooming of the ginger-chested brown she-cat to comment, "Do you really think so?"
"Mhm," Robinwing replied and gave the pale tabby's shoulder a lick, "you're proving you're a capable queen, whether a tom cares about kits or not, that grabs one's attention."
"But what about you?" Goldenflower asked.
Robinwing purred, "Fuzzypelt's an understanding tom; all has been well."
There was a pause while they continued grooming, each with an eye on their kits while they tussled together.
"You know," Robinwing said between licks, "perhaps some she-cats like toms who do well with kits too."
Goldenflower understood perfectly this time, "You mean

Brindleface."
Robinwing confirmed this, "Well she was all over Whitestorm until Redtail became a father."
Goldenflower twitched her whiskers, "They had been close since they were kits."
"And a kit ruined it," Robinwing laughed.
Meanwhile, the kits paused in their game. Lightningkit laid and Firekit sat in the dust they had kicked up, both catching their breath. Mouse fur and bones was scattered about them; they had conducted a mock-fight over it after they had finished snacking on it.
Firekit laid her ears against her head, "My tummy doesn't feel so good."
Lightningkit's tongue ran around his muzzle before he replied, "Mine is still rumbly."
His companion prodded him in the side and then glanced around. "Hey look," she mewed, quickly forgetting her upset tummy, "let's go see what they're doing!" She bounced away, through the camp and toward a clump of warriors, Lightningkit right behind her.
She slowed as she neared the cats, carefully trotting up and rubbing against her father to make a good impression. Lightningkit padded along as if there was no question about his involvement in the group's discussion.
"Why hello there," Whitestorm chuckled his greeting while the deputy greeted his daughter with a lick between the ears.
"What are we talking about?" Firekit squeaked.
Lionheart gently but strictly told them, "Nothing for you to be involved in; why aren't your mothers watching you?"
The black tip of Tigerclaw's thick tabby tail twitched with annoyance as he rumbled, "Probably because they're too engrossed in gossip."
"Such is the nature of queens," Redtail laughed.
One of the two she-cats amidst the group, Frostfur, flicked an ear, but said nothing. Beside her, Brindleface lifted a paw and suggested, "Why don't I take them right outside of camp?"
"But-," Firekit began to protest.
Their deputy did not allow her to finish, "That's a great idea!" He touched noses with the grey tabby she-cat before nudging Firekit and saying, "Go on now; you've never been outside of camp before."
Lightningkit swished his tail excitedly in the air, "Let's go; we've

been wanting to for moons!"
Whitestorm murmured, "It hasn't been quite that long."
But only the other warriors caught his comment. The kits were being herded away by Brindleface, Firekit needing yet another nudge from her father before she would willing go.
"What were you talking about?" Firekit asked the she-cat as they neared the camp entrance.
"You'll find out in due time," Brindleface happily told the kit.
"When?" Firekit pressed, but she went unanswered.
They could see what was on the other side of the thorn tunnel, what was right beyond the cat sitting guard. The kits dashed the rest of the way, brushed past the soft grey fur of Willowpelt, and took in the sights and scents of beyond the bramble barrier guarding the camp.
"We're in a hole in the ground!" Firekit declared when she saw the ravine that seemed to slope so much at such height up to the forest beyond.
"Bet I can beat you to the top!" Lightningkit challenged and he bunched up, preparing to leap into a run.
Brindleface caught up to the kits and gently pulled Lightningkit off his paws with just one of hers. "You two can't climb that yet," she explained to them and playfully added, "not even some apprentices are allowed to."
"Not true," Firekit accused, "they have to to go do apprentice things."
"Yeah," Lightningkit agreed flicking an ear to dismiss the fact that for a moment he had believed the she-cat.
"Oh, but it is true," Willowpelt spoke up. The kits turned around to face her as she continued, "Before the apprentices can get beyond the ravine they must do all of their chores in camp."
"How does that help?" Lightningkit asked.
Brindleface sat beside Willowpelt while she explained, "Because StarClan made it that way."
"They did not," Firekit's ginger tail lashed, "they can't do that."
"How do you know?" Willowpelt challenged, "StarClan is capable of many great things."
Lightningkit looked to his denmate, as naïve as the older she-cats wanted him to be.
Firekit seated herself on the cool ground, pulled her fluffy tail around her to rest atop her paws, and then explained, "Because

Leopardfoot told us many stories about Tigerclaw leaving the camp and getting into trouble when he was a kit. And he didn't do any chores."
"Yes, he was quite the wild one," as if on cue, Leopardfoot appeared behind the kits and she-cats and spoke.
With her were Bluestar and Speckletail; all had heard the conversation between warriors and kits while on their way down the ravine. At Leopardfoot's comment, Speckletail had rolled her eyes and Willowpelt and Brindleface exchanged glances.
The newcomers stopped beside the group of four. Leopardfoot purred and said with a sort of proud, "You remember everything you're told, don't you Firekit?"
The she-kit sat proud and as tall as she could, her muzzle tipped upward to seem even more triumphant.
"Yes," Bluestar praised, "you're very smart for a cat your age."
Lightningkit opened his mouth to ask for praise for himself, but before he could Speckletail commented, "She inherited that from Goldenflower."
Leopardfoot quickly responded, "Now, Redtail is the deputy, not Goldenflower or even Lionheart."
"Ah, but..." the she-cats' voices faded as they walked into the camp.
Bluestar watched them go on affectionately and then rested her gaze on the kits. "Both of you will make ThunderClan proud. Now, let's go back inside before the sun falls. A kit's duty is to sleep and grow strong while Silverpelt watches them from the night sky."

Chapter 2:

The river was rushing just beyond the Sunningrocks. The blood was rushing in Firepaw's ears, pulsing through her body as she dashed and ducked and slashed her way through the rival patrol of cats. It was her first fight, she had been an apprentice for little more than two moons.

She noticed a she-cat barreling at her, and so the apprentice leapt, twisted in the air, and landed on top of the she-cat, her claws digging into the warrior's shoulders. The she-cat yowled and rolled over, winding Firepaw. For a moment, the red-tailed apprentice froze, uncertain of how to react or what to do, while the warrior above her drew a paw back. As the she-cat released her bunch foreleg to strike, she was thrown and managed to only bat at Firepaw's whiskers. The apprentice moved to her paws and glimpsed her father battering the RiverClan cat before she dashed into the fray once more.

This time she found herself with a lithe tabby tom. He swiftly side-stepped, the RiverClan warrior instinctually darting after him, but Firepaw took the chance to use her leg strength once more; she forced herself to skim above the smooth stone and use the inertia of her flying fluffy body to push the RiverClan warrior to the ground. Firepaw was careful about not being stunned this time; when the golden spotted cat hit the rock, Firepaw rolled off of her body and to her paws, ready to strike again. But this time it was not as necessary. The tabby took Firepaw's place over the RiverClan warrior and treated her shoulder to his fangs.

Firepaw admired the sight a moment too long. She was knocked from the boulder she was standing to the next one down. The cat who leapt after her was a solid grey like the stone on which they were standing. The tom took a good look at her and twitched his whiskers. This flared anger within her: he didn't think she was worth fighting! The apprentice took his laid back demeanor about her to her advantage. When he outstretched his forepaw to bat her ear as if she were little more than a troublesome kit, she used all of her might to swat his foreleg, to throw off his balance and use that weakness to lunge at him. Her teeth fell into his sleek, fish-oiled fur.

His forelegs surrounded her body and she was forced to the ground as he dragged her down, into a ball of stone and forest fire furs. She felt claws scratching along her back and piercing hindpaws pummeling her soft stomach.
But it did not last long. One of the RiverClan cats yowled in defeat and they all let go of their tussles and ran for the river. Firepaw laid on her side while her clanmates began crying out in victory. She panted, the breath forced out of her from the attacks on her underbelly. She managed a weak meow in triumph when she managed to her paws, wobbling a bit.
"And as it should be," Redtail called out, "Sunningrocks is part of our territory!" The RiverClan cats were soon after out of sight. The calm of victory was falling over the patrol, and the tom picked his way across the boulders to where his daughter stood on shaky paws. He pressed against her and purred, "You fought very well."
Her excited golden gaze met his, "And it was my first one!"
He gave her a lick between the ears before proudly saying, "I know."
He looked to the two warriors with them and declared, "We all did excellent today; Bluestar will be proud to hear about it. Now, let's get back to camp."
As they walked back toward camp, discussion ensued.
"I admit," Thistleclaw meowed to the deputy, "I was skeptical about bringing Firepaw along, but she proved herself."
Meanwhile, the tabby she had fought alongside slipped back to match her pace, "That was pretty good, considering."
"Thanks," Firepaw replied, filled with pride.
Coolly, he added, "Bluestar's teaching you well."
Firepaw flicked an ear and playfully said, "She taught you pretty well too."
He laughed, "Well, what sort of leader can't train apprentices to be the best warriors?" Before Firepaw had a chance to speak again, he thoughtfully added, "You know, it seems like so long ago that I was an apprentice."
Firepaw rolled her eyes, "Oh please, it wasn't that long ago. Even I was there when you were deemed Runningwind."
"Do you remember that or do you only recall it because your mother told you so?" he gently retorted.
Firepaw didn't answer. She offered a shrug that stung her due to the open scratches along her back. She wondered how long they would feel like so, and what the medicine cats would do to them to help. It

was then that she noticed they were just arriving back in camp. Their clanmates looked at them expectantly, Lightningpaw ran over to Firepaw and Runningwind drifted toward his sister, Mousefur. Spottedleaf rushed past Redtail and Thistleclaw, who were headed for Bluestar, and came to Firepaw.
"I'm all right," the apprentice assured, "I did amazing today!" But Spottedleaf's response was something empty and muffled by leaves. She had been in the camp who had believed Firepaw too young and small to go fight. She was quick to chew her leaves into a poultice and lick it along the bleeding claw marks in Firepaw's long, dark fur. The initial feel was a nice cool feeling, but that was immediately overcome by a sting of its own.
"What was it like?" Lightningpaw asked, thrilled beyond the disappointment of not being allowed to go.
But he had been shushed by one of the nearby warriors. Redtail was reporting to Bluestar. They were victorious, no one was too hurt, everyone fought well, and Firepaw exceeded expectations.
"It seems Bluestar was not exaggerating when she told me you're learning swiftly," Goldenflower's sweet meow came as she padded up to her daughter after the report.
Firepaw, no longer being tended to by Spottedleaf, though she had been checked on momentarily by Featherwhisker as well, flexed her claws as she replied, "Yeah it was great!"
Goldenflower purred with great pride to her daughter and carefully rubbed her cheek against her before saying, "Grab something to eat and go rest. You deserve it."
Lightningpaw walked with Firepaw to the pile of freshkill, asking her to tell him all the details about the quarrel, but he was quickly pulled away by Darkstripe.
"Perhaps if you train hard enough today, you'll be ready to go fight next time," the dark grey tabby sternly said to his apprentice.
Lightningpaw looked back at Firepaw as he followed his mentor out of the camp, obviously wishing Darkstripe had not taken Firepaw being chosen to address RiverClan instead of Lightningpaw as a personal insult.
The apprentice chose a mouse and made her way to the apprentices' den, making herself comfortable right outside in a shaft of sunlight to eat in peace.
"Aren't you hungrier than that?" a black she-cat meowed as she strolled by, "You fought hard today."

Firepaw felt a special warmth from the she-cat's words, "No thank you, I'm a little cat with a little tummy."
She had a strong respect for Leopardfoot. The black cat had visited her in the nursery often and told her many tales and brought her the occasional treat. When she became apprenticed she had worried that Leopardfoot would move on to the next kits to be born, but, even though there were no queens anywhere near birthing, that did not seem to be the case. The relationship still felt close. Leopardfoot still cared; was almost a second mother to Firepaw.
"Well you better grab something else before night falls," Leopardfoot told her, "I'll be keeping an eye on you to be sure of it." She spoke with a slight strictness, but her green eyes were filled with warmth. The older she-cat then moved on to her grown son, giving him an affectionate lick.
Firepaw laughed at the sight; she had heard her clanmates tease Tigerclaw on occasion for still being doted on by his mother. The cats who were grown at the time of his kithood would remind the younger warriors that he caused many scares for poor Leopardfoot, and he deserved any embarrassment he felt now.
She did not quite understand though. What was wrong with being close to one's parent? She knew she and Goldenflower would always remain close, though it was not uncommon for queens and their daughters to remain bonded due to the fact the daughters would be aided by their mothers once they became queens themselves. But Firepaw still expected to keep a close relationship with Redtail. He was the best and she could not imagine life without a bond between her and her father.

Chapter 3:

"It is apparent that you're greatest strength lies in your hindlegs," Bluestar meowed matter-of-factly and with a certain awe, "that is something only a few ThunderClan warriors have, so be sure to use that ability well."
"Of course," Firepaw meowed, her fur sticking up in odd ways from the recently finished training session. She was sitting both comfortably and with pride. The thrill of the mock battle still shone in her eyes and beat with her heart.
Bluestar's appraisal continued, "You learn very swiftly; both in training and in learning from opponents. That is a good trait as well." She noticed Firepaw lift her chin and added, "However, don't let yourself get too cocky. You are a fine apprentice and you will make an excellent warrior. There is no doubt you have much potential. But you are still no better than any of your clanmates."
"I know that," Firepaw protested, and while she thought that to herself, she still felt that perhaps her mentor was wrong. She shrugged and mewed, "I'll even be no better than them when I'm leader one day."
Bluestar blinked at her apprentice, unamused. After a pause she softly spoke, "Just don't forget how to handle yourself." She then turned and began walking away from the sandy hollow.
Firepaw got to her paws and followed the leader, a hop to her step. She felt she could be named a warrior in another moon, younger than most new warriors, though not by much. The leader's apprentice and deputy's daughter, an acknowledgement of her skill, what could possibly go wrong? And, couldn't it all be taken as a sign from StarClan that she was meant for something more? Her mind was settling into the thought of being Firestar, leader of ThunderClan, when she arrived back at camp.
The she-cat trotted to her father and sat beside him, helping herself to a bit of the squirrel he had resting between his forepaws.
"Well, hello there," he purred from where he laid beside Brindleface, "how're you?"
After swallowing, his daughter replied, "I'm doing very well." She swiped her tongue around her muzzle.

"Hmm," Brindleface commented, "you seem excited."
Firepaw, still clouded from the thought of being leader of the greatest clan, flicked an ear, "I decided I'm going to be leader one day."
"You have to be a mentor and then deputy first," Lionheart, sharing a thrush with Frostfur, reminded her.
Tigerclaw, an unfinished rabbit before him, added, "And you must be made a warrior before that." The way his amber gaze scraped over her showed his skepticism.
"I think it'd be wonderful," Brindleface meowed. She laid her head along Redtail's back while she looked at his kit. She purred, "Imagine having Redstar and his deputy daughter."
Redtail closed his eyes in humbleness, "That would be a wonder, but pray to StarClan it would not happen soon."
Lionheart, Frostfur, and Brindleface murmured their agreement. Tigerclaw's tail twitched and he took another bite of his meal.
Firepaw casually mewed, "Of course; Bluestar is a great leader." She stood up and turned, muttering in the moment before she walked away, "But, like all great leaders and otherwise, her reign will not last forever." She did not watch to see if the warriors heard her or not. She was ready to groom outside of her den, and then to rest in preparation for the day to come; she had a hunting assessment that would surely be as easy as maintaining her father's love.

Firepaw looked around, took in her surroundings. She was at Fourtrees, but she had no idea how she got there. She had just been hunting with Runningwind....
Two scents in particular mingled in the crisp night air. ThunderClan and WindClan, undeniably. But the scents of clans lingered amongst the great oaks often. Though, that did not explain why the scents of the two clans were stronger than of the other two. She glanced around, and then, she saw them. A tom and she-cat were beside each other, tails twined, softly murmuring to each other. There was no moon shining down on them, Silverpelt did not offer enough light to reveal the identities of the cats.
Firepaw crept closer, being careful to make no noise. Which was her clanmate? She could not tell. The scent of the she-cat was undoubtedly ThunderClan, but not particularly anyone she knew.
"What is going on?" she wondered in a whisper. She decided to listen in to their conversation, and so she perked her ears and sat

still, eyes intent on the couple.
The she-cat happily informed the tom, "I wish you could be there, he's growing into such a strong warrior!"
The tom purred back, "Well, he is an apprentice now; perhaps I'll get to see him at the next gathering."
The she-cat seemed to grow shy, "Do you think Pinestar will allow Windpaw to attend so soon?"
The tom pressed his muzzle closer to the she-cat, "He can't keep him away from a gathering forever."
"I don't know if the clan trusts him," the she-cat confessed, referring to their son again.
Firepaw was genuinely confused. Who were these cats, one apparently a clanmate of her own? Why did they have a son and who were they talking about? Firepaw and Lightningpaw were the only apprentices at present; in fact, Firepaw did not know a warrior with the name 'wind' except for Runningwind. She was certain the handsome tabby tom was not the half-clan son in question.
"Firepaw," she flicked her ears at the sound of her name. Had the ThunderClan she-cat spoken to her? The voice came again, "Firepaw, why aren't you ready yet?"
Fourtrees faded away as morning light engulfed Firepaw and she found herself laying in her nest, Lightningpaw softly snoring beside her, in the apprentices' den.
"Firepaw?" the voice came again. Panic gripped Firepaw: that was Bluestar's voice!
"I'm coming!" Firepaw called and squeezed out of the den in a rush, almost running into her mentor.
Bluestar's eyes expressed no emotion as she stated, "I did not expect this from you."
"I'm sorry," Firepaw said repetitively between licks as she rushed to groom herself.
It was a terrible start to the day. And she did not quickly recover from her morning misstep. Several birds fluttered out of her paws. In hunting a squirrel she had snapped a twig; while she caught the fuzzy-tailed rodent, she had to travel to a new part of the territory to find more prey. And the worst of the fails was a mouse whose tail slid right between her fangs.
But she managed a few catches. A couple of voles, a rabbit, a thrush and robin. It was not the worst of catches to bring back to camp. Still, she was disappointed with herself and she could see her

mentor was as well. The apprentice dropped her catch on the fresh-kill pile and, ginger tail dragging in the dust of the clearing, made her way toward her den. She collapsed to the ground outside the entrance and began grooming, hoping no one would ask her about the assessment.
Her wish was not granted. "You get back from hunting all morning and don't grab something to eat for yourself?" It was Leopardfoot. As the sunlight shined down on her, it was revealed that her pelt was mottled instead of a solid black.
Firepaw sighed, pausing in her grooming and stretching in laying out so as to be more comfortable. "I'll eat later," she didn't know if she really would, "I just don't have an appetite right now."
Leopardfoot sat down in front of the apprentice and tipped her head to the side, "Why? What's the matter?"
Firepaw looked at her paws and mumbled, "I woke up late and then my assessment didn't go as well as I planned."
Leopardfoot looked over her should at the pile of fresh kill and then back at Firepaw, "That's not bad."
Firepaw shrugged. Without thinking, words escaped her and began streaming into explanation, "It was just so weird. The dream I had last night. That's why I woke up late and why I was distracted during my assessment. And the dream served no point; I don't even understand it."
"What happened in it?" Leopardfoot asked, something in her voice seemed to suggest she had something special in mind.
Firepaw blinked several times, letting the dream fill her thoughts. "Well, at first I was hunting with Runningwind. But then, I was suddenly at Fourtrees and it was night. There were two cats there: a ThunderClan she-cat and a WindClan tom. But I didn't recognize the she-cat and they talked about Pinestar being leader and an apprentice, who was their son, named Windpaw, but other than Runningwind, there's no one here with that sort of name."
Leopardfoot understood better than the apprentice. "There was a tom named Windflight in the clan once," she explained, "and he was half-clan, a ThunderClan mother and WindClan father." Firepaw was silent. In that time, Leopardfoot commented, "I wonder why you dreamt about them."
The apprentice swished her tail. Half-clan? There really had been a half-clan ThunderClan warrior? "What happened?"
"What do you mean?" Leopardfoot replied first, but then added, "He

became a ThunderClan warrior, had kits, and eventually joined StarClan."
"Kits?" Her fur began to raise. Were they half-clan too? Or was there mother ThunderClan?
"Thistleclaw, Rosetail, and another she-cat named Sweetpaw," Leopardfoot told her.
Firepaw's fur fell a bit flatter. She trusted Thistleclaw and Rosetail. She would never have doubted their loyalty. There was no doubt about it that they were ThunderClan cats to their core. "Oh," she meowed.
The conversation did not last much longer. The remainder of the day seemed to pass in a blur. Firepaw was lost in thoughts of half-clan warriors, their betrayals and descendants all around. How many other instances were hidden amidst scents of clan unity?

Chapter 4:

Firepaw could not help but feel that the leaders had nothing of importance to report. Everything was well, and if it was not, well, what leader would openly say so? No clan wanted to be viewed as weak or as easy targets. The leaders did not want their clan preyed upon nor did they want to come across as a poor leader. While the gatherings were great for meeting other clan cats, they were terrible for learning anything about the circumstances of the actual clans, at least as far as the leaders' reports were concerned.
So the tabby-tortoiseshell she-cat fidgeted where she sat, Lightningpaw beside her. The way the moonlight struck them altered his appearance: the apprentice appeared to be as white as fresh snowfall, but streaked with the long black shadows of trees. The she-cat's golden gaze darted around the cats gathered. The thought came to her mind of being one of the many cats gathered on the opposite side of the Great Rock, of watching the leaders' tails twitch and laugh and watching their haunches tense and adjust as they all fought for presence atop the mighty stone.
Her whiskers twitched at the immature thought of watching the leaders from behind and listening to their voices ring about the area and thus hearing them as if listening from in front of them.
A glare in her vision caught Firepaw's attention, and she looked to the left of her. She saw a shaft of moon was resting upon two blue-grey cats, shining on their pelts as if they had just slipped down from Silverpelt. She did not know the warriors, though she had seen them briefly before. However, she did recognize a cat sitting a few rows behind them. The dark grey fur contrasted with the pale yellow eyes. Firepaw's vision flashed with the image of two light brown cats, the tom a tabby and the she-cat soft-furred. There was a place between river and moorland where they had met, where they fell into what was forbidden, where they created two kits.
Two names slipped from Firepaw's tongue, "Graykit and Willowkit...." She did not know their warrior names, though she was aware that they were warriors. She could recognize them anywhere, even though she had only met them in her dreams when they were little grey kits unintentionally introduced to her by their

parents.
"What?" Lightningpaw asked, dumbfounded and a bit loud. Several hushes scolded him.
Firepaw flicked an ear and moved her muzzle to his ear when she whispered, "Nothing, I just recognized a couple cats."
He gave her a questioning look and she wondered if he had heard the 'kit' part of their names. But, they spoke no more for the remainder of the gathering.
"So," the clan was on their way back through their territory, headed for home, when Rosetail trotted by the apprentices, "what were you two whispering about during the gathering?"
"Nothing," Firepaw's reply was rushed. Her thoughts were centered around half-clan kits, and her thoughts could not help but jump to the she-cat's father, Windflight, who had been half-clan and began the series of dreams Firepaw had been having.
Rosetail's swished her pinkish-orange tail and mewed, "Oh really?"
Lightningpaw's tail tip twitched and he glanced at Rosetail, "I thought she said something, but she didn't." He shrugged, "Not to me anyway; I guess she was talking to herself."
Firepaw focused on the ground beneath her paws. She did not want to think about forbidden kits nor causing a disruption during the gathering. She did not want to be viewed as a strange clanmate who spoke to herself, but she did not want to explain her actual thoughts or lie about what was on her mind.
Forbidden kits. There were none presently. She padded into camp with her clan and soon heard the little sounds of young warriors. It had not been long ago that Robinwing had another litter. Firepaw had gone to see the little toms, a black one and a dark brown tabby. She had tried to make Lightningpaw visit them since Ravenkit and Dustkit were his half-brothers, but he refused to set paw near the nursery.

"You seem off today," Bluestar gently commented. She moved to her paws and took a step away from her tumbled apprentice, "you've seemed to be less skilled than when you began your apprenticeship for at least a moon now."
Firepaw huffed as she rolled over and moved to a sitting position. Her ginger tail was twitching along the soft ground of the training hollow. Although it pained her to do so, she admitted, "I've been distracted."

She angled her gaze toward her blue-grey mentor, but her vision was still swimming with her thoughts, drowning in the memory of her dream; the kits of a white-tailed calico queen lost to the river. So much distress and pain, the queen's heart tugged harder than the currents on her kits. Of all the half-clan dreams she had had, that one had been the worst. It did more than cause her to question the blood of all warriors; it would be something that would need recovery. With that dream, Firepaw had felt the pain of the queen and kits as they were pulled apart by the river and then StarClan.
Bluestar blinked blankly, "A warrior cannot afford to be distracted. Especially not for so long."
"I know," Firepaw breathed and hung her head. Her heart ached, her body ached from thrashing for the lives of the kits and the love of the queen. Her breathing felt strained as if water was still pooling in her lungs.
There was a long silence between the two. Leader and deputy's daughter remained in their positions, painfully aware of the other's presence for many moments. In the distance were vague meows from their clanmates.
Finally, Firepaw raised her head. She stood up, tall after a stretch, and her eyes met Bluestar's like the sun comes into the sky. She took a deep breath and swished her tail. Then the words came out, "Why can't there just be one clan? Who in their right mind decided it makes sense for four different groups of cats to share the same expanse of land with no quarrels over borders or prey or mates? Is StarClan really so wise if they're the ones who have set us up for and maintained a state ideal for failure?"
Bluestar's eyes widened and her fur rose along her back. She lashed her tail and demanded, "What gave you such heinous thoughts? How dare you question the ways of our dear ancestors and warrior code?"
Firepaw's ears fell flat against her head, "Have you never thought we are all being blind by continuing our ways? No matter how many times the code is amended, it has always been broken and will continue to do so as long as it is." With a growl of frustration she added, "Why can't there be just one clan other than for the fact so many warriors are blind?"
She was sick of it. The clans were already tainted with each other's blood. No matter how many generations back or recently she dreamt, it was the same story. It was ridiculous and insane to

continue. It had to stop.
The leader's claws unsheathed and she took a step toward her apprentice making an effort to stand taller and look down on the she-cat. Her voice dropped and she rumbled, "Never question the ways of a warrior again unless you truly wish to abandon it. And if your heart has been stolen by a warrior forbidden to you, abandon those feelings now."
"I'm loyal to my clan," Firepaw insisted, "although I have been wondering if perhaps my clan is presently divided into four."
"We will not discuss this any further," Bluestar sternly said, "I will hear no more of this." The ThunderClan leader began walking away, her stressed claws leaving indents in the ground. At one point she paused and looked over her shoulder, the sunlight highlighting her just so, "From the moment you arrived in Goldenflower's nest I knew you held a great amount of potential; if you keep up this attitude, or go so far as to act upon it, you will have thrown all of what you could have had away." She turned and stood for a moment before continuing on toward the camp.
Firepaw lashed her tail, "I do have potential, more potential than any other warrior." When she realized Bluestar was putting distance between them at a faster-than-expected pace, the apprentice called out, "I'll use all my potential to change the clans forever, change them into something better!"
She scratched the ground and then, feeling a surge of energy, raced out of the hollow. She ran into camp and stopped in the middle of it. Life was going on normally. No one else knew what was plaguing her; her dreams, her thoughts, her emotions. They thought all was well, living amidst tainted bloodlines, spending extra effort on wasteful borders and prey that belonged to all.
Her gaze found its way to the nursery. Dustkit and Ravenkit were inside with their mother, already having tales of split clans being ingrained into them. Brindleface and Willowpelt, growing plump with kits of their own, would do the same to their little ones, as would the rest of the clan as the kits aged.
"What has you worked up?" a low voice came.
Firepaw jumped a little. Her head swung and she was faced with the large tom passing by her. It was Tigerclaw and he was giving her a scrutinizing look.
She forced herself to calm down and then coolly meowed, "I just got back from an invigorating training session."

"Of course," he meowed sounding serious, but she could tell there was something more to it. She watched as he padded to the pile of freshkill and grabbed something for himself.

Another moon had passed. Firepaw heard Thistleclaw comment, "A tom, his love, and their kit; there are not many things a warrior can come across as wondrous."
Firepaw had thought she agreed with the tom. She was excited to have a little sister. She could not wait to see who Sandkit would grow into and what times they would enjoy together and with their father.
It would not take her long to understand there was a flaw in her thinking.

Chapter 5:

"Don't worry, I'll be able to watch her just fine."
"Are you sure? She can be a bit of a pawful."
"I've managed all four of them at once before."
"But that was in camp."
"Please, Brindleface, I'd really like to get to know Sandkit better. I'm only going out to collect moss, so I won't be far from camp, and I know I can handle her."
"Well, okay, but be careful, please!"
The conversation from that morning rang in Firepaw's ears. She had been lucky to sway the queen; if Redtail had been in camp and not on a patrol she would have never been allowed to treat her sister.
Not long after the pale ginger kit had been born had life shifted. Redtail focused his attention and love on the daughter of his mate, and not his eldest daughter. He was protective over the kit and rather obviously did not entirely trust any cat other than Brindleface with the precious furball.
Firepaw shrugged off the alteration in her father's affection with the fact that Sandkit was still just a kit. The apprentice remembered when she had been a kit and even a young apprentice, and assumed once Sandkit aged their father's treatment of them would equal out. Instead of feeling bad, Firepaw tried to focus the energy on being close to her little sister. So far, so good. And today was a special circumstance, Firepaw getting to let the kit see beyond the camp walls before she was technically old enough.
"This is so amazing!" Sandkit squeaked excitedly.
Firepaw purred, "And we're not even that far from camp yet." She looked down at the small pile of moss in front of her, pawed it and then said, "But perhaps I could take you farther out. There doesn't seem to be much moss to collect around here and I can't come back to camp with so little."
The she-kit's light green eyes widened and she stood as tall as she could, "Go farther, really?"
Firepaw flicked an ear, "Are you brave enough?" She issued the challenge light-heartedly.
Sandkit nodded furiously, "Of course, I'm the bravest warrior in the

forest!"
The elder sister's fluffy ginger tail swished and she picked up her small pile of moss, mumbling around it, "Follow me then."
Firepaw kept a close watch on her sister while they trotted away from the camp. The kit marveled at their territory, sometimes shrinking down or pushing near her half-sister when frightened by things she had never been faced with before. The apprentice also noticed a few leaves were beginning to fade from their green color and that the breeze carried a light chill. Shortly before stumbling upon moss-covered trees Firepaw wondered about getting Sandkit back into camp. She had carried her out of the ravine, but would be unable to with a mouth full of moss. She figured the journey down would not be as difficult for the kit, but also considered balling the moss and rolling it down the ravine, then following after it while carrying Sandkit.
"You think you can be an apprentice, right, well why don't you help me with some of this moss?" Firepaw meowed after placing her petite pile on the ground. She then began clawing at the base of the tree.
"Okay!" Sandkit enthusiastically replied. She threw herself at the tree and clawed viciously for several heartbeats, but her interest was quickly lost. A butterfly fluttered by and the kit was after it without a thought.
Firepaw was warmed by her sister; she loved her kin more than the other kits. And watching Sandkit brought back memories of when she was Firekit. Both Redtail's daughter, both born with a litter of Robinwing's, both vivacious she-cats. For a few moments she lost herself in nostalgia and the rhythmic teasing out of the moss. A light thump brought her attention back to where she was and what she was doing; she was aware of Sandkit nearby, though just out of sight behind a tree. Confident in the situation, Firepaw took a moment to bad to a nearby puddle and lap up some water.
When she returned to her position, now with a decent pile of moss, all seemed well as she set up to pluck more greenery from the bark. But after a moment, the apprentice realized she could not hear her sister. Suddenly alert, she got to all paws and scented the air, there was no trace of her sister nearby. Panic flared inside of her, her long furs stood on end.
"Sandkit?" Firepaw cried out, "Sandkit!" How far could she have gotten in a moment's absence? At least, Firepaw hadn't felt like she

had been away for too long. Regardless, she caught a scent trail from her sister and raced along it.
Thoughts rushed in Firepaw's mind. There was so much that could happen to a kit alone in the forest, but at the same time, what were the odds that anything had happened to her? Surely Sandkit had merely wandered off in some sort of great kit adventure.
A sound pierced Firepaw's thoughts. It was shrill, a shriek, the very opposite of Sandkit's excited squeaks and squeals.
Heart racing, Firepaw ran harder, using the extra force her hindlegs contained to her best ability. What she had been praised for in training was being put to use in one of the most important ways. As far as Firepaw was concerned, this was more important than any border quarrel, this could be life or death for her young kin.
As the scent trail, tainted with fear, led to a bush, Firepaw glimpsed fur the color of her father's bushy tail. Claws ripping at the grassy ground, the apprentice hauled herself near the predator and caterwauled, "Leave my sister alone!"
Faster than ever before, she bunched her muscles and released as much energy as she could, launching herself at the fox. She landed against the creature's body, sinking her claws into its skin and her teeth into its shoulder. She had managed to knock it off its paws for a moment and send pain along its body, but the fox was not ready to give up. It grabbed at Firepaw, getting hold of her hindleg, and swinging its head as hard as it could.
Firepaw was ripped from the fox and found herself flying through the air, terrible pain stemming from her leg. She landed with a rough thud and the breath knocked out of her. On top of that, the pain was so bad it seemed to ring in her mind, it pulled her from consciousness. She was last aware of a she-cat screeching and the presence of deceased warriors.

Chapter 6:

"There was a hole and she told me to go see it."
That was all that Sandkit was able to say about what happened that day. She merely repeated her stammering, repeated that sentence. Days had passed and there was nothing more Sandkit said about the situation. She did not say who the 'she' she mentioned pertained to. The cats of ThunderClan figured it must have meant Firepaw, the only cat Sandkit had been with who just so happened to be a she. At least, that was how the leader and deputy felt. Firepaw had heard no end about it since waking up in the medicine cat den. Redtail had immediately accused her of being jealous of Sandkit and Bluestar had sided with him, frowning upon her apprentice. Goldenflower, who had been part of Redtail's patrol in the area of the event, had protected her daughter best she could from any scrutiny.
The clan did not know what to think about the situation. Most resorted to whispering about it and trying to forget the situation, concerning themselves with everyday matters.
Spottedleaf had explained to Firepaw that on top of the cuts in her leg from the fox's teeth, her entire leg and been pulled out of place. It was easy enough for her and her mentor to put the limb back into place, though the pain from the situation had probably been what kept the apprentice from consciousness for longer. Regardless, she was stuck in a nest for several days while her leg healed. It was not yet something she could put weight on and so she was virtually useless.
Lightningpaw, Goldenflower, and Leopardfoot visited Firepaw frequently, coming to share a meal or share tongues or perhaps to merely chat. Runningwind came into the herb-scented den once and the look he gave Firepaw clawed at her heart: he was uncertain whether to believe she was innocent in her sister's endangerment. It reached the point where Firepaw was losing hope, and with it energy. She did not desire to get back into clan life, to continue training. The clan's trust was no longer guaranteed to her, certainly any praise from her mentor had dissipated and along with her father's pride that he had held for her in her earliest moons.

And then the dreams...memories of forbidden relations persisted in haunting her sleep.
As the she-cat slipped from a foggy reality into sleep, the two main states she was finding herself in, she was gripped in cold. She found herself surrounded in bluish white, snowflakes falling around her to the soft but freezing blanket she was standing in. Yet, even being enveloped in snow Firepaw felt the scene was dark. There was something more to it, more than being set in the night.
Firepaw heard mewls coming from nearby and she trudged through the snow to observe the forbidden family. Her amber eyes widened at the sight of the queen.
If the blue-grey fur and blue eyes were not enough, the voice telling of a game to the three kits assured Firepaw she was looking at Bluestar. They were not far from camp. The apprentice felt numb, but not from the cold. Stiffly, she followed her leader and the kits as they fought their way away from the safety of the camp walls and the warmth of the nursery.
Firepaw watched when the queen and kits stopped. The solid, stone-colored kits complained, while their patched littermate lay, no longer able to carry on. Bluestar acknowledged the white-and-grey kit. It was apparent that the queen was not happy, was grief-stricken. But Firepaw was sickened and shocked. She raced to the kit even before Bluestar and her remaining son and daughter continued their quest toward the border.
"No," Firepaw hoarsely meowed, "get up, you have to get up, you can't die!" This had not been the first kit she had witnessed die, but this one pulled her to the situation even more so than most others.
"StarClan don't take her! Please!" A white form was appearing near the lifeless body, awakening a tiny spirit from within it.
"No!" Firepaw wailed as the StarClan cat led the kit away. Her ears flat against her head, she sat in the snow feeling defeated. She glanced toward the direction Bluestar had led the other kits, where they would soon be presumably meeting their father. "How could you do this, Bluestar?" she murmured, her voice strained with heartache.
"Terrible, isn't it?" a voice came from behind Firepaw.
The apprentice looked over her shoulder and saw a calico she-cat shrouded similarly to the cats of StarClan, though not quite the same. Firepaw assumed the she-cat looked different than most StarClan cats due to the dream, the weight and darkness of it.

The ThunderClan apprentice got to her paws and turned to face the newcomer, "I know you," she meowed, "I dreamt of you before. You and your kits. You lost them in the river long ago." The memories flooded Firepaw and she felt that sense of pain renewed, her legs felt weak beneath her from nothing more than the thoughts.
The cat, cloaked weakly in ThunderClan scent, blinked at Firepaw. The tip of her white tail twitched. "You can prevent this from ever happening again, you can change the clans. And I can help you."
Firepaw blinked blankly at the she-cat, uncertain what to think and still filled with feelings of mourning and loss.
"I want to help you." The she-cat promised before fading away along with the snow, the night being replaced by shafts of morning light streaming through the den walls.
"When will she be ready to train again?" a deep voice asked.
The silver medicine cat answered, "Any day now. She's healed up very well."
Firepaw sighed and stretched in her nest. Her movement caught the attention of the toms speaking. The larger of the two padded over to her, his dark tabby fur glistening when the light caught it.
"I don't know if anyone's told you yet," Tigerclaw said to her, "but I'll be mentoring you for the remainder of your apprenticeship."

Chapter 7:

"Come on now, you've wasted enough time here; let's get to training already." Tigerclaw rumbled.
Firepaw kept her golden eyes closed and her fluffy tail pulled close to her body, the tip tickling her nose. "I'm not well enough yet," she muttered.
Spottedleaf, seated near the large tabby, let out a sweet breath before gently saying, "Featherwhisker said you are perfectly healed up. There are just a few minor scratches remaining and perhaps a small pain, but nothing to prevent you from returning to your duties."
Tigerclaw, tail twitching with annoyance, growled, "So get up and let's go."
Firepaw said nothing, only remained tightly bundled in her makeshift nest. Before either tortoiseshell could react or understand what was happening, Tigerclaw moved forward and, with great irritation, pulled Firepaw from her nest. When he dropped her onto the cold medicine den floor her fur raised and she indignantly let out a hiss.
He replied, "You have no excuse to remain in here and no authority to deny me. We're going to go train now, whether or not you like it."
Firepaw's golden gaze met her new mentor's and held it steadily. She was ready to let Tigerclaw know that he did not intimidate her; he never had. Still, she knew better than to argue further with him and followed him out of the den, tail dragging behind her.
Spottedleaf called after them, "Don't be too rough on her, Tigerclaw, the point is that she is well enough to move back into the apprentice den, not stay longer in the medicine den!"
Out in the open of the camp clearing, Firepaw found her eyes narrowing against the light. It seemed much more intense than before, more glaring and unforgiving. There was never so much light in the medicine den, of what rays beamed through the tunnel walls. And the she-cat felt different too. While the medicine cat and his apprentice had been getting Firepaw to walk around the den some, she had not been active at all in her time there. When

allowed to stay in her nest, she did so, slipping between foggy wake and dreams of a white-tailed she-cat and the depths of the river.
Although the air had chilled into a constant cooler temperature, Firepaw felt heat all over her: she knew she had her clanmates' attention and that embarrassed her greatly. She knew they had been whispering about her, wondering what had happened that day with Sandkit as well as why it was taking her so long to heal and emerge from the medicine cats' den. And now she was refueling their thoughts and questions of her, instead of allowing them to forget about her as she wilted away surrounded by the scent of herbs as she would have preferred.
"It is so good to see you up and about," Goldenflower purred across the clearing to her daughter. But Firepaw did not respond to her, instead her eyes had been caught by a different tabby. For the briefest of heartbeats, Firepaw and Runningwind had been looking directly at each other. He had acknowledged her existence once again. But both young cats quickly broke the silent exchange off immediately.
On the way to the training hollow Firepaw noticed that none of the leaves were green anymore and bunches were beginning to fall to the forest floor, crunching underpaw. Not only did the forest feel different, but so did the apprentice's body. It ached and it ached heavily, all over. Every muscle in her body screamed both with stress from misuse and the urge to be used once more. She felt both like collapsing and running all the way across the territory.
Before she realized it, the bushy-furred clanmates were in the sandy hollow and Tigerclaw was lunging at his new apprentice. Claws sheathed, his huge paw had enough force to knock Firepaw over. Before he could immediately pin her down, she rolled away and, coming out of the roll, used her hindlegs to leap in the air. She fell back with her paws beneath her, pressing against the dark tabby fur along Tigerlaw's back as she landed atop of him. He instinctively reared up, flinging her back into the dust. As she scrambled to her paws, Firepaw felt a blow to her hindleg, the very one that had been taken by the fox when she saved Sandkit. The apprentice let out an unintentional yowl of pain as she fell back to the ground.
"Does it hurt too much to continue?" Tigerclaw asked with an even voice, but Firepaw knew that it was a sort of sneer, a challenge.
The deputy's daughter seized the moment her mentor took to taunt her to steady herself on her paws and lash her tail. Muscles tensed,

she held his gaze as she replied, "No, I'm fine."
He only blinked at her before flicking an ear and turning to walk away, "Well you're certainly out of practice. We'll have to train everyday on top of your other duties in order to get caught up."
Not quite ready to give up, Firepaw bunched her muscles, ignoring the throbbing pain still pulsing in her hindleg, and threw herself at Tigerclaw. Her forelegs wrapped around his thick throat, while her hindpaws battered at his back. Surprised, it took him a split moment to roll over, crushing her beneath him a mere moment before they found themselves tussling in the hollow, kicking up dust and both full of energy.
The cats did not pull apart until the sun was falling from the sky, bathing them in evening light. Both warrior and apprentice stood, panting. Firepaw felt her body quivering, she had pushed it much farther than it had been prepared for, and she noticed Tigerclaw was looking at her differently than he had when they began. Perhaps he was pleased with his new apprentice, at least a little bit. Firepaw felt pleased with herself.
She rather happily followed Tigerclaw back to the camp. They were both silent except for their breaths, vague clouds billowing from their muzzles. Back in camp, Firepaw padded to the entrance of the apprentice den and seated herself beside Lightningpaw, who was in the middle of consuming a small bird. He purred at her arrival, swallowing his mouthful before meowing, "So you're finally back, huh?"
Nodding, she replied, "My nest is still in there, right?"
"It may have become part of mine," Lightningpaw admitted, half-chuckling, and then he flicked an ear, "Do you want a bite?"
Firepaw felt her stomach rumble and realized she was experiencing a hunger that had not been inside her for at least a moon. Grateful, she slid to her belly beside her friend and took a chunk of the bird. No more than a heartbeat later did she regret it.
The clan was aware of her again; they were watching and whispering once more. In a way, she had rejoined them, but they did not know whether or not to trust her. The kits, Sandkit included, tried to come greet her—Firepaw used to enjoy playing with them outside the nursery—but Redtail stopped them and sent them back to their mothers. He glared at his eldest daughter only a moment before returning to Bluestar's side to discuss clan matters.
The deputy's daughter realized that the way her clanmates felt was

legitimate. Sandkit could have been killed when Firepaw took her out into the forest and there was no way to explain the kit's words, that a she-cat had lured her toward the fox's den. On top of that, Firepaw had shown no zeal in returning to her duties. She hid in the makeshift nest given to her in hopes she would not have to face the clan again. She had been doing nothing while their lives had continued on. Feeding each other, caring for each other. She did not deserve the prey she now had to force herself to swallow.
"Are you all right?" Lightningpaw asked before taking another bite of avian.
Firepaw looked at the ground in front of her as she replied, "Yeah I'm fine, just tired."
He swiped his tongue around his pale muzzle. "Y' know, even with the extra moss, the den has been pretty cold since Leaf-fall has come. You wouldn't mind sharing the nest, would you? Instead of separating it into two again..."
"Sure, that's fine." Firepaw mewed. She took the exchange as an excuse to retreat into the den and seek comfort in the pile of moss. Lightningpaw joined her not long after, curling up beside his best friend.
Firepaw could feel her longer furs brush against his short ones, their body heat being exchanged and shared. As the tall tom drifted to sleep, he softly said, "Its good to have you back." Then his eyelids fell and he slipped into the depths of peaceful slumber.
The she-cat would not find the same rest as her companion. She would meet the white-tailed queen once more. This time, they were not observing any other forbidden situation, nor drowning in her own. They sat, facing each other, in a forest dark and gloomy, illuminated by a light not created from the moon or stars or anything Firepaw knew of.
"I've seen you so many times now," Firepaw meowed, "why is that?"
The queen simply answered, "Because I can help you attain exactly what you want."
"And what is that?" Firepaw retorted, "Because right now all I want is a new life!"
The queen's ears fell flat a moment before she sternly responded, "You can fix the one you have at present. I know you can, I can tell you how. I'll be there with you every step of the way."
"Why?" Firepaw asked, dumbfounded. She noticed that even though it was a dream, she felt out of energy.

"Have you ever heard the name Mapleshade?"
"No, why?"
"That is my name. I was banished from ThunderClan and my mate took another. Her offspring are now leader and deputy of RiverClan. While mine are...," her voice trailed away.
Firepaw felt her heart twist with upset at the memories of Mapleshade's kits. Not only did she experience that dream from the queen's perspective, but also as one of the kits. The emotions were the same and utterly unbearable.
Finally, Firepaw spoke, "So Crookedstar and Oakheart shouldn't be alive."
Mapleshade grimly meowed, "That is correct and neither-," but Firepaw had interrupted.
"Neither should their children, Bluestar's kits."
Amber gazes were locked with understanding and emotion. Firepaw did not know what to expect, but she knew Mapleshade was not lying to her; the queen truly would help her.

Chapter 8:

"Here," a muffled meow came.
Firepaw looked over her shoulder as the large, dark tom dropped a squirrel beside her. She was sitting atop one of the large smooth stones of Sunningrocks, gazing across the river in thought of the cats who lived there who had no right to exist.
"Prey is becoming scarce, save this for someone who needs it more than I," Firepaw mewed steadily. She looked away from her mentor and back across the river.
Tigerclaw snorted, "You do need this. I've noticed you've been holding back from the pile of freshkill. Others have too; it was Leopardfoot who insisted I bring this to you."
Firepaw twitched her whiskers.
Impatiently, Tigerclaw lashed his tail, "You must eat. It has been affecting your training. I'm not blind, I noticed that you weren't yourself in training and that Lightningpaw spared you the embarrassment. But that can't be in real battle or on patrol, you must always be at your best."
"ThunderClan doesn't need me for battles or patrols, or anything really," she meowed, "and honestly, they don't really want me. Most of the clan still doesn't trust me."
"Perhaps if you'd take part in clan life instead of just stare into RiverClan they'd be more willing to let you back in," Tigerclaw rumbled, "but it seems you don't even want to be ThunderClan anymore."
Firepaw was silent. Tigerclaw stood beside her for several heartbeats before saying, "I'll report that you're ready to be named a warrior so long as you start eating again. Maybe once there's prey in your stomach again you'll have the sense to see that ThunderClan needs you."
The she-cat listened to his claws scrape against the stones as he began walking away. Without looking back, Firepaw called out, "Tigerclaw?"
From the lack of sound, she knew he stopped to listen to her.
"Have you ever thought that there should be one clan? That would fix the half-clan problem, you know."

He growled, "No, I have only ever concerned myself with ThunderClan, where my loyalty lies. As should yours."

The deputy's eldest daughter was aware of Mapleshade's proud presence that night even though she was seated in ThunderClan camp beneath the moon with her best friend. Even with her worries about clan life, she found joy in the declaration of her new name: Fireflight. The idea that her powerful hindlegs could send her flying pleased her, made her feel the potential she had always known was inside of her. Like the others, she had been uncertain how to react to her denmate's shortened name: Longtail. Would Lightningtail truly have been too much of a mouthful for instant orders such as in battles? They would never know, Bluestar had already renamed the pale tabby tom.

Fireflight and Longtail sat pressed together to brace against the cold. If anything, the weather meant they would not become comfortable enough to dare drifting to sleep on such an important night. Yet, Fireflight could not help question it. She no longer had faith in her warrior ancestors, only Mapleshade.

During the night there was movement from within the camp. Longtail and Fireflight watched with numb interest as a tabby emerged from the warriors' den. They watched the tom, Runningwind, drowsily pad to the dirtplace. Not too much longer and he made his way back through the clearing. Before returning to the den filled with sleeping cats, he paused and looked at the two new warriors. Fireflight wondered if he was going to congratulate them, but the tabby disappeared into the brush without a word.

The remainder of the night was uneventful. Pale rays of sunlight bathed the forest but did not warm it. Their clanmates congratulated the young warriors once more as they made their way into the clearing, seeking Redtail and his plans for patrols. The young warriors were dismissed to their new den, Mousefur tasked with helping them attain nests of their own.

Before Fireflight stepped into her new resting place, her attention was caught by the new apprentices who had replaced her and Longtail.

"Come on, let's see what Redtail has planned for us!" The dark brown tabby excitedly mewed to his brother as he scrambled across the clearing.

The small black tom stood in the entrance to the den, looking out

nervously.
"Tigerclaw will have his patience tested with that one," a warrior commented.
"But no doubt it'll pay off," another mewed in response.
The scared apprentice's eyes met Fireflight's. She had been one of the few cats to have bonded with him while he had been in the nursery. She had not seen much of him since her accident with Sandkit, but it was apparent he still remembered.
The young warrior felt a warmth inside of her, seeing how Ravenpaw and Dustpaw had grown so quickly, and called out, "Don't worry, you'll do great!"
Ravenpaw blinked at her, obviously questioning her words of encouragement. She took a moment to watch Tigerclaw greet him. Ravenpaw seemed even tinier when near his massive mentor. But she thought nothing of it, following Mousefur as she and Longtail were led to their spots in the warriors' den.

"First you need to fit back into the clan again; they can't have any doubts about you," Mapleshade meowed before pulling a paw over her ear.
"I know," Fireflight responded, pacing in their dim clearing, "but that will take time."
Mapleshade flicked her fluffy white tail, "That's true. Take the next moons to strive to be the best warrior you can be. Gain their trust and respect, perhaps take a mate. It won't be right away that you'll be granted an apprentice."
"That'll be the first major step, having an apprentice," Fireflight mused, "then I'll be eligible to be deputy and eventually leader."
"What makes you believe you will be chosen for such a role?" Mapleshade tested.
Fireflight flexed her claws as she replied, "I'll take the position if I have to. Say, both leader and deputy die in battle. If someone steps up to lead the clan, who is to deny it?"
"StarClan?" Mapleshade suggested.
The young warrior ignored the response and continued, "I have to become leader. Only as leader could I unite the clans as they should be. And that will mean no more half-clan cats. There will be no more trouble that way."
"StarClan is more than capable of setting the clan against you," Mapleshade explained, "It would be as simple as a message to a

medicine cat."
Fireflight padded up to Mapleshade, their muzzles nearly touching, "But you could send a sign too, right? Mapleshade, if something like that were to happen I would need you more than anything."
The calico queen replied, "I know. And I'll be there so long as you help me in return."
Fireflight sighed and turned away, pacing. "I can't say I agree with murder. Bluestar's kits deserve to suffer the same as their littermate; half-clan cats are broken code and thus not allowed. However, Crookedstar and Oakheart exist accordingly."
A light growl came from the faded warrior, "Will you do it or not?"
The tabby-tortoiseshell's ears fell flat a moment before she responded, "I'll do it. I'll have to. Perhaps I shall include Bluestar as well. Of all cats, she deliberately broke the warrior code and then gave her kits away, led one to her death."
There was a silence before Fireflight spoke again, "It'll be a shame that she'll be dead though. I'd love to show Bluestar a queen is capable of being leader. I suppose she'll be watching from StarClan...."
Mapleshade spoke up, "While I don't fancy StarClan any more than you, I must warn you to not underestimate them quite so much. If you're not careful, they can destroy you."
Wrinkling her nose, Fireflight turned to face Mapleshade. "How do you mean?"
The tortoiseshell-and-white queen simply said, "They've already tried once."
Puzzled, Fireflight opened her mouth to ask for more information. Instead, she found her jaws gaping into a yawn as she entered into wakefulness. The light streaming through the den was clearly from the sun and the sounds around her were from her clanmates.
"I hope you'll be able to sleep tonight," a warm, familiar voice mewed, "I'm sure Redtail will expect you up early tomorrow for patrols."
Fireflight purred in greeting as Goldenflower approached. She padded toward her mother and affectionately brushed against her. "It doesn't feel like it was all that long ago that I used to race out of the nursery before you'd wake up in hopes he'd assign me to a patrol."
Goldenflower twitched her whiskers in amusement, "You were always anxious to serve the clan."

"I still am," Fireflight softly stated.
"But of course," Goldenflower replied, her words portraying the fact she truly believed it.
"Are you hungry dear?" Leopardfoot called out from where she and Robinwing were hunched over a rabbit.
Fireflight and her mother exchanged glances before walking over to the other warriors, grabbing freshkill along the way.
In response, Fireflight meowed, "only a little bit," as she sat down with the mouse she had grabbed for herself.
After the she-cats ate a few bites in silence, Robinwing muttered, "I remember how much coaxing it took Ravenpaw to leave the nursery when he was a kit; I was worried this morning would be the same thing!"
"Well he knows the camp by now," Leaoparfoot noted.
"But he hadn't been outside of camp yet," Robinwing countered.
Goldenflower licked her muzzle before saying, "Well at least he made it out without too much commotion. He's had a relatively good start to his apprenticeship; I'm sure he'll be fine."
Leopardfoot proudly meowed, "Under Tigerclaw's guidance he'll surely become one of the best warriors!"
Fireflight agreed, "Yes, Tigerclaw is an exceptional mentor."
"Perhaps that will help," Robinwing mewed thoughtfully before angling her ears toward Fireflight, "you know, he looks up to you. They both do, really, but Ravenpaw especially since he's so shy with everyone else. I bet he'll be more willing to learn from Tigerclaw if only for the fact that he was your mentor too. At least, as far as Ravenpaw can remember."
The young warrior added, "And I'll be more than willing to help him if he needs anything. I'm not going to stop checking in on them simply because their apprentices now."
Thoughts of the young apprentices filling their minds, the she-cats allowed their attention to drift to the young toms. Both were near their previous denmates; Dustpaw was standing tall, boasting to Sandkit while Graykit begged Ravenpaw for details of his first day out. Willowpelt and Brindleface were sharing tongues nearby.
"Bluestar has always enjoyed visiting the nursery," Goldenflower suddenly murmured.
Robinwing nodded, "Yes, I think that's one of the reasons she is such a good leader; she gets to know her warriors from the day they arrive."

Leopardfoot paused a moment before adding, "You know, Fireflight, it is funny that Bluestar did not finish your training; you are very much like her."
The young warrior felt a flare of emotion insider of her; she wanted nothing to do with the leader! But she fought herself to not allow that to show. Instead of her fur raising, she dipped her head and meowed, "Well, that just means I'm destined to be a great leader one day as she is." As they believed Bluestar to be, Fireflight corrected the statement only in her mind. She then focused on finishing her mouse.

Chapter 9:

Fireflight had completed the dawn border patrol and was immediately heading out of camp yet again. Her paws always itched to move, move away from camp and away from her oblivious and judgmental clanmates, move to the spot that was almost sacred to her.
She spent so much of her time sitting atop Sunningrocks. It didn't matter to her which clan technically owned it at any given time: she no longer cared for affairs of separate clans. Now that a chill was in the air, fewer cats rested atop the smooth boulders, absorbing the sun, as it no longer offered much warmth. But that was not Fireflight's reason for perching at the highest point of the rocks. The fluffy she-cat would sit and ponder all her dreams and thoughts and feelings. She would gaze into the distance and think of all the kits born of two clans, of Bluestar's who had been forgotten and frozen and Mapleshade's who had been drowned and replaced.
And she would listen to the river as it flowed by below her. When she wasn't dreaming of Mapleshade, the she-cat would be lost beneath the current. It would tug at her fur and block her senses and almost cradle her right above the riverbed. She would hear the calming sounds of underwater but they would almost turn into whispers, such faint mews, that such was her fate, her destiny.
Fireflight leapt to her perch, but before she could seat herself, all of her brown and ginger furs began to rise. The scent of another filled her nostrils, and that was something she had not expected.
A lithe tabby cat came out from a crevice between two of the boulders and leapt up to the one where Fireflight was standing. "Oh, hey," he greeted her.
Without intention, Fireflight's ears fell flat and she took a step back, her furs still bristled in surprise, "Runningwind?" As his name flowed out of her muzzle she realized how odd she must have seen standing as so, and so she forced her furs flat and her ears erect. She gave her chest a quick lick, trying to cool off her embarrassment, and then asked him, "What're you doing here?"
He flicked an ear, the extent of his acknowledgement to her almost suspicious display, "Well, you've been coming here so much lately

that I was wondering if maybe you're onto something. I figured it'd be a good idea to have a look around and see if any RiverClan cats have been here lately."
Fireflight slowly, numbly, shook her head, "No, no one's been coming here. Its getting too cold for that."
He gave a curt nod in agreement, "No one but you."
Fireflight's jaw slightly dropped and she almost hissed a response to him. But she did not know what to say. It was true, she had been frequenting the site, but so what? She wasn't a RiverClan cat, nor was she meeting with one. She had done nothing wrong, but she couldn't help but feel a sort of hostility.
"I guess with all that fur you just don't feel the cold like the rest of us," he swished his tail, "but then again, you're not the only warrior in ThunderClan with longer fur."
Her fur began to bristle yet again, "Are you accusing me of something?"
He blinked at her, "What's there to accuse? From what I can gather you haven't done anything wrong."
A silence hung between them for several long heartbeats. He awaited her reply but she did not know what to say. She couldn't even bring her gaze to his, let alone think clearly.
Finally, Runningwind meowed once more, "Well, prey is getting scarce, I better go catch what I can before it's all gone." He turned to leave, glanced over his shoulder at her one last time, and then began padding away.
Fireflight's golden eyes fell shut and she had to take a deep breath. It felt as though he had taken his claws and was slowly raking them through her fur. That pain was worse than any wound from battle.
"Wait," the wail forced itself out of her.
The tabby tom turned and faced her, looking up at where she still stood on the boulder. "What is it?"
Fireflight opened her eyes. She looked at Runningwind a moment before looking out over the river. "I come here because I often dream of the river."
He looked puzzled a moment, but then he flattened his ears and asked, "Are you going to leave us for RiverClan?" There was something in his voice Fireflight hadn't heard from him before. It almost sounded like disappointment or regret.
The she-cat, alerted, quickly reassured him, "No, no, definitely not!"
His ears flicked up again and he took several steps closer to

Sunningrocks. "Then, what?" he prompted.
"Well," Fireflight sighed, "I dream of being in the river, of it taking me away." She noticed that his expression was one of confusion and concern. She gave a slight laugh and added, "I can't swim; I'm not a fish you know, even in dreams!" And she added another uncertain chuckle.
But he didn't laugh. Instead, he leapt to her side and peered cautiously over the edge and into the river below. "Why do you dream of that?"
Fireflight oriented herself to face the same direction as he. She could not help but feel the urge to close the small gap between them in the process, but found herself unable to do so. She looked down at the water as it flowed downstream, lapping at its own banks. "I don't know. Sometimes it almost seems like there are StarClan cats there too, like that's what they want," she couldn't help but admit.
Runningwind unfolded from his crouch and turned his head to hold Fireflight's golden gaze. "Why would they want that?" He shot a glare at the river before adding, "No, it doesn't matter. It's just a dream. StarClan would never wish such a thing for you or any other warrior. It's just a dream...a nightmare. Ignore it."
A sense of urgency rushed through Fireflight, "How do you know that? What have StarClan shared with you?"
"No more than they have with you!" he retorted. Both cats were on their paws now, lightly bristling at each other. He continued on, his voice raised, "Medicine cats and leaders share tongues with StarClan, not young warriors like us, not even senior warriors like Patchpelt or queens like Speckledtail."
Fireflight felt herself stand tall "Leaders converse with StarClan and Bluestar's a leader and-,"
"Is that what this is all about?" Runningwind interrupted, "Your apprenticeship?"
"You know there's more to it than that: the clan doesn't trust me, in part because our leader refused to even finish training me!"
"You didn't exactly help matters and you know, kits aren't supposed to leave camp in the first place."
"It would've been fine if-,"
"If what? What could you have done differently other than not bring Sandkit into the forest at all?"
Fireflight searched her mind as quickly as she could, muzzle poised

to respond to him, but ultimately, all she could say was, "I don't know."
He huffed, "You let that one event change you. Even when you healed up, even when the clan was ready to accept you again, you continued pushing us away. You act like your life has been ruined but if that's the case, you brought it upon yourself."
"But StarClan, my dreams!" she protested.
"It's all nothing, just dreams," he sternly told her, "and if you're so certain otherwise, maybe you should go to the Moonstone."
At that moment, for the first time that day, Fireflight was aware of Mapleshade's presence. The young warrior could hear her dark mentor murmuring, "That is not something I'd advise just yet."
Fireflight did nothing to acknowledge Mapleshade's words. Instead, she took a step away from the tom and seated herself, glaring at the river. What could she tell him? What more was there to say?
A heartbeat passed in silence. Fireflight was forcing herself to stare at the rushing water below. Her bushy tail was pulled around her. She wanted to be alone in that moment, she wanted to disappear or for Runningwind to leave her be.
Instead, he moved closer to her. Their tabby fur was brushing and both sets of eyes were trained on the river below them. His tail curled around her back as he sighed and gently meowed, "You know, I'm only here right now, saying all of this, because I care about you. We all do, everyone has been worried about you. We want the vivacious cat you used to be back." He paused, obviously hoping she would respond.
But she said nothing. Her heart twisted in a way she had not expected. It wrenched and writhed in her chest, wanting so much, yet, receiving not enough.
Finally, Runningwind added, "I want to-," but he faltered. He took a breath and retrained his gaze on the river below before rephrasing, "I want to be your friend again."
Fireflight looked up, and as she did so, Runningwind moved the same so as to meet her gaze. He was still beside her, fur brushing and tails around her, and their noses were nearly touching.
"Really?" the question almost came out as a squeak.
He nodded, "Mhmm."
They remained like that for another moment, holding each other's expression and feeling the warmth of the other's breath.
"Perhaps," Fireflight found the courage to suggest, "we should go

hunting before going back to camp."
"That's an excellent idea," Runningwind almost purred.

Not all of the leaves had yet to fall, but the majority of the prey had already disappeared. The pair had been lucky enough to return to camp with one kill each. Neither muffled words around their prey as they walked through the tunnel and towards the pile of fresh kill, but Fireflight was well aware a few pairs of eyes had noticed them. Sandkit and Graykit raced to the young warriors and eyed the fresh prey, one a thrush and the other a squirrel.
"That's all you caught today?" Sandkit asked with a certain tone to her voice that had only recently come into existence. Fireflight could already tell her younger sister would be a warrior with quite the attitude.
But she gently explained, "Prey tends to go away in Leafbare, so there is less to catch."
Runningwind muttered, "Except, it isn't Leafbare just yet...."
Before another word could be spoken, a vicious coughing came from the medicine cat den. Runningwind and Fireflight, startled, snapped their gazes toward the den, ears angled in the direction.
"Who's sick?" Runningwind asked to no one in particular.
Willowpelt supplied the answer as she approached, "Robinwing and Leaopardfoot were coughing all morning, so Featherwhisker and Spottedleaf have been keeping a close eye on them today." She then gathered the kits with her tail and mewed, "Come now, you two, you've been out long enough in this cold. We don't need you coming up ill too."
Fireflight and Runningwind exchanged glances. Then he slowly shook his head and repeated, "It isn't even Leafbare yet."
The young warrior sighed, her breath billowing out in a cloud. She understood his point: the cold season was going to be exceptionally rough.
"Oh, Robinwing...," Brindleface whimpered from where she stood right outside the nursery.
Willowpelt, trying to ease her denmate's nerves, meowed, "She's a strong warrior, you don't need to worry over her like she's Sandkit."
Fireflight found the exchange interesting. She recalled the fact that Robinwing was Brindleface's mother as well as Dustpaw and Ravenpaw's. It made the young warrior think what it would be like if her own mother had been the one coughing.

She glanced over to Goldenflower, who was sharing tongues with Patchpelt, and felt a shiver overtake her body. Fireflight wouldn't know what to do if the golden queen were to fall ill. Or worse, summoned to StarClan.

Chapter 10:

"I killed her," he breathed, his eyes wide in horror and his breath billowing from his muzzle in a thick cloud.
Fireflight's ears flicked and her furs stood on end from the shock, "What?"
Longtail's head hung and let out a ragged breath, "Poppydawn, she died because of me." His words were only a whisper.
The young warriors were sitting in the middle of the forest, far from their patrolling clanmates and the cats back at camp. The pale tabby tom had not been his usual self as of late, and so Fireflight had urged him to talk. He agreed to do so, but only in private.
"You didn't kill Poppydawn, she died of greencough," Fireflight reminded him, "just like Fuzzypelt and Leopardfoot." Her own heart ached for the loss of the mottled black warrior. Just speaking her name sent Fireflight back to that night for a heartbeat. The air had been frozen and still all but for the sound of cats coughing. Leopardfoot had requested to see two cats: her son, Tigerclaw, and his most recent apprentice, Fireflight. As usual, the she-cat had nothing but praise for her sole-surviving kit. For Fireflight, Leopardfoot had assured her of a shining future, that she was more than she knew. But that barely mattered as she coughed away the last of her life and joined their starry ancestors.
"You don't understand," he insisted, his gaze meeting hers again, "Darkstripe and I went hunting and he...he ate a squirrel I caught and pressured me to, and I gave in. But if we hadn't eaten the squirrel, and brought it back to camp, Poppydawn could've had it and would've had strength to fight for her life."
Fireflight took a breath before meowing, "Longtail...." However, she didn't know what to say to him. They sat in silence for a little while, he ashamed and she uneasy. Finally, Fireflight got to her paws and told him, "I can't console you. What's done is done, let's get back to camp now."
As the young warriors returned to the safety of the ravine, they found little sense of security. So many of their clanmates were battling an unseen enemy, their bodies being rattled by the coughs that were overtaking them.

"Hey Fireflight!"
The fluffy she-cat looked to where the little voice had come from. She saw her little sister bouncing towards her, the kit's ginger tabby fur pale as rays of sun. But her light green eyes were bright as ever, regardless of the cold and coughing all around her.
"Hiya Sandkit," Fireflight purred. Even after the incident they shared, Fireflight felt no negativity toward Redtail's other daughter.
"Didn't you catch anything today?" the kit asked, tipping her head to one side. Although her question was innocent, her mew was tainted with scrutiny.
Longtail flicked and ear, catching his friend's eye a moment, and then padded toward the warrior's den.
Fireflight looked down at Sandkit and explained, "No, we didn't go hunting today."
"Did you protect our borders?"
"We weren't sent on a border patrol either," Fireflight, slightly embarrassed, admitted, "Longtail and I just went out to talk."
"Like you do with Runningwind sometimes?"
A wave of internal heat overcame Fireflight. Runningwind and Fireflight had been venturing out of camp together more often. While there was little to it, in reality, she was still surprised Sandkit had noticed.
"No, not quite," Fireflight told her and quickly added, "Longtail and I are kind of like you and Dustpaw. We're just friends."
Sandkit was silent a moment before resigning, "Oh." Of course, Fireflight knew there would be a chance Sandkit and Dustpaw would find mates in each other one day, but the near-apprentice had no such thoughts just yet. Without too much pause, a new thought came to Sandkit: "Will you take me hunting?" Her whiskers quivered with excitement at the prospect.
Fireflight twitched her whiskers in amusement, "I doubt Redtail will ever let me take you outside of camp again."
Sandkit's ears fell flat, "He doesn't even usually let us play in camp...." But her ears flicked back up as she glanced around and mewed, "But, we don't have to tell him."
"I'm pretty sure he'd find out." Fireflight responded, glancing around. She knew their father was around the camp somewhere, as he too was fighting off illness. The deputy's eldest daughter could not help thinking how fortunate she would feel to have greencough steal him away instead of their other clanmates. She almost found

herself bargaining, "sacrifice the deputy of the rest of the clan?"
"But," the kit opened her mouth to protest, only to be cut off.
The cats had fallen silent so swiftly and with such force it nearly felt like a blow to each of them. The force had been enough to grab even Sandkit's attention.
Redtail had surfaced from the medicine cat den. Beside him stood Bluestar and together leader and deputy looked upon their clan. Fireflight had a hunch what was going to be said before words, and then cries of grief, filled the camp.

"Her condition was improving," the words wafted on Spottedleaf's herbal breath, "but after Fuzzypelt joined our ancestors, Robinwing seemed set on that path too."
"I suppose it would be hard to try to get better when your heart is so broken," Frostfur mewed from where she sat beside Lionheart. She leaned against the tom's thick-furred, muscular body for support, the grief of her father renewed and topped with the new loss of her mother.
Brindleface crouched nearby, beside Redtail, with Sandkit tucked between them. The entire clan was gathered to bid farewell to Robinwing. Fireflight was saddened at the loss of her clanmate, but also felt numb. So many warriors were joining StarClan that it almost seemed hopeless there would be anyone remaining in ThunderClan once Newleaf arrived.
Dustpaw mourned from beside his mentor, Redtail, but his brother, Ravenpaw, found himself huddled next Fireflight. Feeling protective over the little black tom, she had pulled her bushy ginger tail around him.
Long into the night, after all the cats had fallen silent and many asleep, he looked up at Fireflight with eyes big as moons and whimpered, "She's gone."
The young warrior understood Ravenpaw was a fragile little tom. She knew as well as the rest of the clan that he was a nervous cat and calling him merely attached to his mother was an understatement.
Fireflight inhaled the cold night air and looked into the clear sky, where Silverpelt twinkled gloriously above them. "Look up at the stars," she told him gently but solidly, "do you see the one the one shining brightest?"
She paused a moment while he searched above his head. "Yeah," he

squeaked.
"That's her," she told him, "That's Robinwing showing you she's with StarClan now, but that she's still watching over you." After a pause she looked down to Ravenpaw, held his gaze, and promised him, "She'll always be with you."
The apprentice blinked at her before turning his gaze back to the star above him. Fireflight watched as he looked up, perhaps feeling more secure than before. Her heart felt warmed as she could see the tense muscles beneath his pelt relax, and how he broke into a yawn while looking up to his mother. She leaned over him and gave him a quick lick between the ears.
"You know," she whispered to him, "I'll always be here for you too."
Ravenpaw pressed against Fireflight, warmed by her long furs. On her other side, the she-cat was aware of Goldenflower casting her a glance with loving yellow eyes. A particular look that said, "you'll make a fine queen one day."
As much as Fireflight loved the idea of settling into the nursery as a queen with kits, for the first time, she was hit with the pang that such may not be her fate. Not because she could be leader or any other factor any other cat would experience, but because she her thoughts and dreams were so filled with loss and heartache between queens and their litters.
Her golden eyes were lifted to StarClan, but she only felt emptiness. They held no answers for her and certainly promised her nothing.

Chapter 11

Leafbare was intense. It was not the snow that was so bad, but the sickness that raged through the clan. The cold had brought an unseen enemy to ThunderClan and they were losing that battle as well their fights for Sunningrocks.

"It is good to see you're finally coming around!" Runningwind purred. He pressed against her long, soft furs.

She chirped in response, "My clan needs me!"

"It sure does," he rubbed his cheek against hers.

She did the same in response to his action. They had been growing closer and closer, hoping the other would not fall ill and join StarClan prematurely.

The duo jumped as pawsteps crunched the snow. They looked over their shoulders and saw another cat approaching.

"The clan may need more kits, but that can wait till Newleaf. Right now we need more prey," the big, dark tabby rumbled.

Fireflight lashed her tail, "We're just chatting, Tigerclaw, nothing more!"

The idea of raising Runningwind's kits flashed in her mind and her heart ached, knowing she needed to become leader above all else. But...would it really hurt to have one litter of pure-blooded ThunderClan kits?

"Still, the clan is weak and hungry," Tigerclaw replied.

"We can hunt on our way back to camp," Runningwind decided.

And so they did, but they did not find much of anything. Runningwind caught a mouse, but it was so frail it was hardly more

than a twig.

"I see you've been with a certain tabby a lot lately," Goldenflower said with a small amount of cheer. It was hard to be cheery in such grim times.

Fireflight sighed and her fur grew hot, "Sure, but we're just friends."

"Mhmm," Goldenflower responded, "that's how the best relationships start!"

Rolling her amber eyes, Fireflight leapt forward. She stood near the border with ShadowClan, and scented the ground.

"How are we?" Whitestorm asked.

"Good!" Fireflight called back, "Just need to mark."

And so they did.

Fireflight and Longtail were sharing a shrew. It was not much, but it was all the pile of fresh kill could spare for them.

"So, are you going to be in the nursery soon?" Longtail casually dropped the question.

"Did you really just ask that?" Fireflight looked at him disbelief.

He blinked at her innocently, "It is an honest question!"

"I'm a *warrior* and I want to serve my clan best I can," she told him sternly.

"Why not as a queen?" Longtail countered, "We're low on kits and apprentices and you are clearly in *love* with-," but he was interrupted.

"Shut up!" she hissed, "Runningwind and I are just friends."

"Sure," he rolled his pale eyes.

She decided to tell him, "I want an apprentice soon."

"Runningwind hasn't even had an apprentice," Longtail pointed out, "Besides, why would Bluestar give you an apprentice?"

"Redemption," Fireflight replied, "In fact...," her words drifted off as she got to her feet and moved toward where Bluestar and Rosetail were sharing prey.

"What is the matter?" Bluestar asked curtly as her former apprentice approached.

Fireflight seated herself and asked with dumb courage, "I'd like Sandkit to be my apprentice."

"No," the request wasn't even thought over.

"But, I could redeem myself!" Fireflight insisted.

Bluestar sighed, "You are young. You are inexperienced. You are in love. You can redeem yourself in other ways for now."

Fireflight's jaw hung momentarily before she spluttered, "But Sandkit is the perfect opportunity!"

Bluestar insisted, "I'm afraid not."

Fireflight, bushy red tail lashing, stormed out of the camp. Her heart was racing and thoughts bombarded her internally. Bluestar was unfain. She was keeping Fireflight from her potential, from her future! The young she-cat was sure of it!

What to do?

"Fireflight," Mapleshade murmured.

Chapter 12

The dark calico's words echoed in Fireflight's ears.

"Be patient," she had said, "We have time. We will win, but only if you don't ruin it with your excitement."

What did Mapleshade know? She had not amounted to anything in her life, and she was telling Fireflight what to do? Laughable!

"Fireflight," a tom called out.

"Longtail," the name billowed in a cloud from her muzzle.

He carefully approached. It was dark in the sky, but the snow reflected what little light there was, offering a shimmer to the night.

"Are you okay?" he asked although he knew the answer.

"I'm fine!" she snapped.

He blinked at her, came over to sit beside her. They were both silent for a moment, only her seething breath breaking the stillness. The snow had stopped falling, so Silverpelt shone overhead. Longtail looked up at them and waited for the right moment.

"Do you think Robinwing is watching over us right now?

This caught her off guard.

"What?"

He blinked at her, "That's what you told Ravenpaw. Were you being honest?"

"Of course I was!" she replied as if her were dumb.

"What do you think they want of us?" he asked.

She looked up and a sense of dread filled her. She used to have faith in StarClan, but that had since gone away with her joyful youth.

"I don't know," she admitted.

He sighed, "The clan isn't doing so well. Do you think we'll survive?"

Blinking helplessly, Fireflight said, "I'm sure. We are ThunderClan!" But she was not really so sure.

Some more moments passed in which they said nothing. Finally, Longtail said, "Let's go to sleep now." He turned, waited for her to follow, and they made their way to the Warriors' Den.

Bluestar shouldn't be leader; she betrayed her clan and kits.

Someone has to take over and help the clan.

Redtail is better than Bluestar; his daughters are pure ThunderClan!

Fireflight was out on her own. She could not go to the sunningrocks on this oddly sunny day. Instead, she wandered the forest, pretending to hunt. She could not concentrate. All she could think about was dethroning Bluestar.

She continued wandering until she heard a voice. It was older but regal.

It was Bluestar.

Fireflight snuck through the snow and dead brush, careful to make as little noise as possible. Once she had Bluestar in sight, the leader separated from her hunting party, she made a decision.

The younger cat leapt and the older, the blue falling into the snowy dead grass beneath the brown and red.

"Fireflight," Bluestar gasped, "What is the meaning of this?"

"I know about your kits, Bluestar," Fireflight hissed, "I *know* you shouldn't be leader!"

Bluestar's eyes widened like pools of melting snow. Fireflight was ready to make a killing blow, but Bluestar managed to push the heavier she-cat off of her. Not ready to give up, Fireflight circled her leader. Passion was flowing in her blood, puling through her heart with every beat.

"Fireflight, you must stop this," Bluestar calmly told the younger cat.

"No, now is time!" Fireflight insisted. She charged at Bluestar and barreled her over, lunged with her fangs bared.

"Bluestar?" a familiar voice rang out.

Fireflight's heart dropped. It was not but a mere moment before she was pulled off of the blue-grey cat.

"Redtail," Fireflight growled at him, "stay out of this!"

He was clearly confused, "What are you doing?"

"What is right!" Fireflight declared, "And I'll take you down too, if I must!"

But the brush was rumbling. Fireflight knew she was outnumbered. Her bravery turned to fear, she turned and ran.

What do I do? She asked herself. *I can't go back to Thunderclan now!*

She was headed toward RiverClan territory.

Mapleshade's voice whispered loudly, "Stop, Fireflight, stop!"

But there was no changing Fireflight's course of action. The young warrior leapt off the edge of the ground and let herself plummet into the icy river below.

"Swim!" Maplehshade insisted.

But Fireflight allowed the water to cradle her as it pulled her deeper, her long furs weighing her down.

Mapleshade was trying to move the body, pulling at its scruff. But all that happened was a separation of Fireflight's being from her drowned body.

"No!" Mapleshade hissed, "You mousebrain!"

Epilogue

Bluestar looked down at young Firepaw, pleased with how he just defeated Longtail in his first fight. For a moment, she was sent back.

A brown and red tabby sparred with the lean pale tabby. They played as kits and trained as apprentices. That cat had had a lot of potential.

But she went insane and threw it all away. Bluestar had spared the young cat the humiliation of the clan knowing, after her death, that she had attempted to murder their beloved leader. So they mourned the water-logged body once they found it along the shore.

Tigerclaw had been the other cat to show that day, and he had tried to stop the cat her partially trained. But she was faster and did not seem to hear him calling. He was also the one to find her body, to bring it to camp and show her mother, Goldenflower.

Fireflight could have been the fire, Bluestar thought, *but she gave that up for StarClan knows why*.

--Moons later--

Goldenflower was fast asleep with Tigerclaw's litter piled beside her belly.

The brightly colored queen was walking through the forest. She felt younger, though she was not sure why. Redtail was with her and so were some other cats.

A canine scent wafted over her tongue, and she became nervous. A screech from her child, and she was sent running.

This had happened before. It was Firepaw!

But this time, the cat who landed on the ground in front of her, torn and bloodied, was Swiftpaw.

Goldenflower jolted awake. She wanted to go check the apprentices' den, but refrained. She had to stay with her youngest litter.

Only, there was suddenly a commotion outside. She stayed put.

The scent of blood was overwhelming. What had happened?

Longtail's voice was barely caught by her ears, "Swiftpaw, no...."

Swiftpaw?

Goldenflower left her resting litter and peered out of the nursery.

It was a nightmare.

How many of her own would she lose? How many times would her heart break?